

# Vesak Festival & The United Nations Holiday

*Bhikkhu Professor Dhammavihari*

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Your Excellencies of the Diplomatic Corps, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.

We thank you for your presence with us this afternoon when we have gathered here together to celebrate the United Nations declaration of the Vesak full moon day as a day of observance. A few words to you about our State and Religion.

Here we are in Sri Lanka. Let us remind ourselves that we are assembled today in an essentially Buddhist country. We are nearly seventy per cent Buddhist in Sri Lanka. We know of the existence in this country of Hindus, Christians and Moslems making up the balance. Nobody has felt the need to make Buddhism the state religion here. In the fifth century A.D., Fa Hsien, the Chinese traveller Buddhist monk who arrived here, referred to the land as the Country of the Sinhalas or as written in Chinese characters as Seng Chia Lo.

Buddhism was peacefully introduced to this country more than twenty-three centuries ago, by a supreme world ruler, Emperor Asoka of India, via the ruling head of this land, King Devanam Piya Tissa. The establishment of Buddhism here was no outcome of a colonial expansionist policy. Thera Mahinda who acted as the emissary to Sri Lanka was Asoka's own son, and in the execution of his mission he has shown great political sagacity and diplomatic vision.

His first sermons delivered here like the preaching of the Cullahatthipadopama Sutta revealed to the natives the transcendental grandeur of the new religion as well as the need for people at large to arrest social decay by accepting a sound social philosophy. The latter is epitomized in the preaching of the Vimanavatthu and the Petavatthu. He also insisted that it was the

nativisation of the sangha in Sri Lanka, rather than the implanting of a segment of Indian monks in the land that would contribute to the consolidation of the monastic community here.

One of the first impacts of the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka was the inculcation of the respect for all grades of life in the land, of man and bird and beast. It is more than an ominous event of far reaching consequences that Thera Mahinda, on arrival here on the full moon day of the month of June, caught the ruler of the land red-handed, going out on his regular deer hunt as part of his royal sport.

Such an act, particularly by the head of state, would be an outright contradiction of Buddhism's first principle of respect for life or maitri. Devanam Piya Tissa could not possibly do this any more. He had to respect his dear friend, Emperor Asoka of neighbouring India. And much more, he had to uphold the teachings of the treasured gift of dhamma which his friend had sent him. The ruler had to turn a new leaf. And this, he did. It did not take long in Sri Lanka for the turn of this tide.

Kings began to show consideration for the life even of animals. Ban on the slaughter of animals came to be imposed from time to time. Kings of Sri Lanka like Amandagāmini, Silākāla, Aggabodhi IV and Mahinda III, following this tradition of just kingship, ordered from time to time that no animals should be slaughtered [*mā ghātaṃ kārayi dīpe sabbesaṃ yeva pāṇinam*. Mhv. 41. v.30]. They set up veterinary hospitals for the treatment of sick animals. That even fishes, birds and beasts [*macchānaṃ migapakkhīnaṃ* Ibid. 48. v. 97] came under the loving care of a king like Sena I is undoubtedly owing to the benevolent influence of Buddhism. Sanctuaries for animals, including 'safe pools' for fish in rivers and lakes became a common sight in the land.

History of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, from the introduction of Buddhism to the island more than twenty-three centuries ago, provides one of the finest examples of the benevolent role of religion in the formulation of state policy anywhere in the

world. Let us remind everyone who is interested to know, that it is a vital ingredient of Buddhist teachings that statecraft should be toned and blended with religious considerations that enhance the quality of human life.

It is much more than a ruler being 'a defender of the faith'. He is not a hired servant. Buddhism describes a good king as dhammiko dhammarājā [a righteous ruler who rules in terms of his religious norms]. He is himself an embodiment of goodness and justice as proclaimed by his creed. It is for the ruler to provide safety and security to the lives of the people who are under his or her care. It includes all grades of people, from those of the royal household to those in the country and the village. It includes, without any mistake, the security even of the birds and beasts of the land: *rakkhāvaraṇaguttiṃ samvidahati migapakkhīsu*.

This immediately clarifies the position that Buddhism does not require the separation of state and religion. That injunction, we believe, is only a remedy prescribed for cases where the emergence of an over-powerful clergy of any religious denomination within a country becomes a menacing threat to the peaceful continuance of state administration. But Buddhism looks upon the healthy combination of the two as the only answer to the thorny situations of political decadence and decline.

Woven around the semi-legendary idea of the Universal Monarch or Cakkavatti in Buddhism, the finest advice given to kings or statesmen comes in this form: " When political leadership, personal or doctrinaire, reaches a stage of stagnation and collapse, wiser counsel should prevail." With the collapse of power of the Universal Monarch, he is asked to reorganize himself and re-establish himself in the tenfold Ariyan duties of a Cakkavatti. The last of these calls upon the Cakkavatti to go up to the virtuous and exemplary men of religious life (sramanas and brahmanas) in his kingdom and inquire from them as to what is good conduct conducive to weal and welfare, and adjust himself accordingly, avoiding evil and doing what is good. When these duties are well accomplished, we are told that kingship would be restored. This, it must be most emphatically stated, is the healthiest and most wholesome grafting of state and religion. In

terms of Buddhist thinking, this is what we would uphold.

It is lamentably tragic that the English translations of the section of this sutta where these ideas occur (done in 1921) completely reverse this position. The religious men are presented as coming to the monarch and questioning him concerning what is good and what is bad, and hearing what they say he is asked to deter them from evil and bid them take up what is good. This is a fantastic entrusting to the state of the right to correct religious men (See Dialogues of the Buddha Vol. III. p. 62 and Maurice Walshe: Thus Have I Heard. p. 397).

On this occasion of the United Nations declaration of the Vesak full moon day as a day of observance, I wish to bring to a close this presentation of a few vital Buddhist observations relating to religion and state by finally indicating the manner in which the Universal Monarch in the world of Buddhist thinking reacts when he finds himself the supreme ruler over the four regions of the earth, with the former kings who ruled independently before him acknowledging his suzerainty and wishing to be instructed by him.

He shows no interest in accepting political authority over those newly gained territories. He concedes to them their right to rule over them as they did before, with no thoughts whatsoever of political restructuring, perhaps both ideologically and administratively. His only concern and interest is the assurance through the length and breadth of the universe of a perfect moral order where the five basic precepts of Buddhism, the *pañcasīla*, which could be shared and upheld by any set of decent people anywhere in the world, without any offense to any one, shall be observed without a breach.

'You shall slay no living thing. You shall not dispossess others of their legitimate possessions. Propriety of sex relations of males and females in society, married or unmarried, shall not be violated. Honesty shall be observed. You shall consume no drugs or intoxicants. You shall govern as you have done before.'

[I have given here as faithful and accurate a translation of the text as

possible. See Dialogues of the Buddha. II. p. 203 and III. pp. 63-64 as well as Maurice Walshe: Thus Have I Heard. pp. 281 and 398 for somewhat partially misdirected translations. We are sorry that in many instances social scientists, sociologists and anthropologists and over-enthusiastic political leaders, in many instances, have been misled by these erroneous translations.]

In these circumstances, even the groups who seek to be governed by a righteous monarch are told that it is not their political machinery that needs restructuring, but their moral super-structure. As long as humans are treated with respect as humans, and as long as their fundamental human rights of safety of person and safety of property are safeguarded, Buddhism appears to see no blasphemy in legitimately set up political structures of any country in the world. This is the fundamental principle embodied in this sutta which has an over two thousand years old history: that social justice and human rights shall gain precedence over political ideologies of any parties or persons.

May there be peace on earth and goodwill among men.